The Night Journey and the Ascension

الإسراء والمعراج

[English - إنجليزي]

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The Night Journey

Prologue

The journey of the Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by night from the Holy Mosque in Mecca to the farthest mosque in Jerusalem was a miracle granted to Him by God. It is the first part of a night of wonder and amazement, culminating in Prophet Muhammad's ascension through the heavens and into the presence of God.

"Glorified be He Who took His slave on a journey by night from Al-Masjid-al-Haram[1] to the Masjid-al-Aqsa[2], the neighborhood whereof We have blessed, in order that We might show him of Our signs[3]. Verily, He

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[1] The holy mosque in the sanctuary of Mecca

[2] The furthest mosque in Jerusalem

[3] Ayaat, the word in Arabic, has multiple connotations: proofs, evidences, verses & lessons.

is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer." (Quran 17:1)

It was a physical journey and all the events about to be described took place in one night.

This series of articles will use the word masjid instead of its English translation, mosque. The reason for this is that the word masjid implies much more than the recognisable building where Muslims pray. The word masjid comes from the root "sa-ja-da" meaning to prostrate, therefore a masjid is any place of prostration. The Prophet Muhammad told us "this earth was made a Masjid for me."[4] This gift from God was given only to the nation of Muhammad.

A Muslim can pray in any place that is not impure (with a few exceptions). There are buildings specifically for prayer, but any place a Muslim prays is a masjid, in the literal sense – a place of prostration. The act of prostration is the most honourable part of the prayer. When a Muslim's forehead touches the ground, he or she is very close to God. Prayer establishes the connection between the believer and his Lord, and it was on this miraculous night that the five daily prayers were instated.

In the story to follow you will learn some more about this man called Muhammad and come to understand a little about why Muslims

[4] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

love him. You will also discover why Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem is one of the three Holy Masjids in Islam. God refers to Jerusalem in the Quran as **"the neighbourhood we have blessed"**. The Dome of the Rock, part of the precinct of Masjid al-Aqsa, is the most recognizable symbol of Jerusalem and holds a special place in the hearts of every Muslim. On this journey we are about to undertake you will learn why. So let us travel back through time, to 7th century Arabia, to the city of Mecca and accompany Prophet Muhammad on his night journey and ascension.

The Journey Commences

Approximately ten years after Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations of the Quran, he suffered two grave losses. One was the death of his uncle Abu Talib, the man who had supported and loved him from the time he was a young orphan, and then only two months later, Muhammad's beloved wife, Khadijah, died. This year became known as the Year of Sorrow.

In the years leading up to these sad events, the new Muslims, especially Prophet Muhammad, were persecuted, ridiculed and abused. The strength and loyalty of his uncle combined with the love and compassion shown to him by Khadijah helped him to remain strong and continue spreading the message in the face

of grave adversity. However, he now felt alone and extremely overwhelmed by his sadness.

When one has truly surrendered to God, the pains and sorrows of this life form part of a test of faith, and these tests are always followed by relief. In chapter 94 of the Quran, called Solace, God assures Prophet Muhammad that with every hardship comes relief, and He repeats it a second time with emphasis - with every hardship comes relief. After this extremely difficult year, Prophet Muhammad felt his relief in the form of a major blessing, the Night Journey and Ascension.

"So verily, with hardship, there is relief. Verily, with hardship, there is relief." (Quran 94:4-6)

Even though it was dangerous and he risked attack by the Pagans of Mecca, Prophet Muhammad often spent the night in prayer at the Holy Masjid in Mecca. On this particular night, he was lying close to the Ka'ba (the black cube in the middle of the Masjid) in a state between wakefulness and sleep. An angel came and cut open his chest from the throat to the below the stomach. The angel removed Prophet Muhammad's heart and placed it in a golden bowl filled with faith, the heart was purified, filled and returned to its place.[5]

[5] Ibid.

This was not the first time that an angel had come down and extracted Muhammad's heart. As a small child, Muhammad lived in the deserts of Arabia with a foster family according to custom, for the desert environment was known to be much healthier and more suitable for proper cultivation than the cities. When he was four or five years old and playing in this wilderness with his young friends, the Angel Gabriel appeared, removed Muhammad's heart and extracted from it a portion, referring to it as "a part of Satan". The Angel Gabriel washed the heart with the water of zamzam (the well of Mecca which sprung to quench the thirst of Ishmael) and returned it to its place. The other children ran away screaming, thinking Muhammad was being murdered, but by the time they returned with help, he was alone, scared and white, but with only a small mark from the ordeal.[6]

Prophet Muhammad's mission was to guide all of humanity to the worship of the One True God, thus every aspect of his life formed part of God's plan to prepare him for this great responsibility. As a child, the part of Satan was removed from his heart, and as an adult, about to undertake the building of the Muslim nation, his heart was purified and filled with pure faith.

[6] Saheeh Muslim

The next part of this miraculous night then commenced.

Prophet Muhammad was presented with a white animal he described as being smaller than a horse but larger than a donkey, it was known as al-Buraq. This animal, he said, could take a stride as far as it could see. With one leap, al Buraq could cover an incredibly vast distance.[7] The Angel Gabriel told Prophet Muhammad to mount the animal, and together they travelled more than 1200 km. to the furthest masjid – Masjid al-Aqsa.

Prophet Muhammad was on the back of al-Buraq while the animal's stride reached towards the horizon, and the stars glittered in the night sky over the deserts of Arabia and beyond. He must have felt the wind on his face and been aware of his newly filled heart thumping in his chest. Imagine what signs and wonders of God Prophet Muhammad must have seen on that miraculous journey by night!

Masjid Al-Aqsa

This was a difficult time in the life of Prophet Muhammad, and this journey was a

[7] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

great compliment to him. The deliverance of the message was entering a new phase, and the establishment of the Muslim nation was about to begin. Prophet Muhammad was feeling overwhelmed and alone. The vast majority of Meccans had refused to heed his call or accept his message. Both his beloved uncle and cherished wife had died, and this gift of God offered him support and opened his eyes to the signs and wonders of the universe. After travelling the enormous distance to Jerusalem on the back of al-Buraq, Prophet Muhammad reached the area known as Masjid al-Aqsa. He dismounted and tethered al-Buraq to a ring in the gate.

Another Miracle Occurs

Prophet Muhammad walked into the Masjid – the place of prostration - to be met by a group of the previous Prophets; he then had the great honour of leading them in prayer. God rewarded His Messenger and caused him to understand that the Prophets before him also went through difficult times preaching to their people. They stood behind Prophet Muhammad and acknowledged him as their leader. This was another indication of his importance and excellence as well as the nature of his message.

Before the advent of Prophet Muhammad, all the Prophets delivered their message of submission to One God to their own people;

Muhammad, however, had come for all of mankind. God refers to him as a mercy. God says in Quran:

"He listens to what is best for you; he believes in God; has faith in the believers; and is a mercy to those of you who believe." (Quran 9:61)

The message was international, and this communication distributed worldwide was Islam. The Prophets of God stood behind the newest and final Messenger of God and supported him when his need was greatest. Prophet Muhammad mentions in his sayings that all of the Prophets are brothers.[8] This congregation standing behind Prophet Muhammad was a sign of real and everlasting brotherhood.

The Significance of Al-Aqsa

The fact that this momentous occasion took place in Jerusalem is also of significance. This is the land of the Prophets of God; this is the land of Abraham, Isaac, Moses and Jesus. God was forging a link between his Holy House in Mecca and Masjid Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. God was also linking the so-called cradle of religion, the Holy Land around Jerusalem, with the land of Arabia, the birthplace of the religion designed by the Creator, for all of humanity - Islam.

[8] Saheeh Al-Bukhari

God established Al-Aqsa as one of the three Holy Masjids in Islam. The Holy Masjid in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad's Masjid, yet to be established in Medina, and this Masjid in this blessed neighbourhood of Jerusalem. It is only to these three Masjids to which Muslims can travel for the purpose of worship.[9] One prayer in Masjid Al-Aqsa is worth 250 prayers elsewhere, excluding the Prophet's Masjid where one prayer is the equivalent of 1,000 prayers and the Holy Masjid in Mecca where one prayer contains the reward of 100,000 prayers.[10] God emphasized the significance and sacredness of Masjid Al-Aqsa, and for this reason it plays an important role in a Muslim's life. Therefore it is guarded and protected zealously.

Al-Aqsa was the first qiblah (the direction in which a Muslim turns to pray) in Islam, but this direction was later changed to Holy Masjid in Mecca. Establishing the exact date for this change is difficult, but from the evidence, we can discover approximately when this occurred because the mission of Prophet Muhammad is divided into two distinct periods. The Meccan period, defined by calling the people to the religion of Islam, and the Medinan period, defined by the establishment of the Muslim

[9] Saheeh Al-Bukhari and Muslim

[10] Saheeh al-Hakim

state. Prophet Muhammad and the majority of his followers migrated to the city of Medina in the 14th year of Prophethood.

The Night Journey and Ascension took place late in the Meccan period, while the qiblah changed to Mecca around 15 months after the Prophet's migration to Medina. From this, we can infer that the Muslims faced Al-Aqsa when praying for approximately three years before God changed the direction to Mecca. This by no means diminished the significance of Jerusalem or Masjid Al-Aqsa, it merely represented another step in the establishment of the message for all of humanity. The Holy Masjid in Mecca was fixed as the central point in Islam.

The Journey and Miracle Continues

While still in the sacred precincts of Masjid Al-Aqsa, the Angel Gabriel presented Prophet Muhammad with two cups. One was filled with milk, the other with wine, and both offered to the Prophet. Prophet Muhammad chose and drank the milk. Angel Gabriel then said to him "Thanks be to God, who guided you to the fitrah; if you had taken the wine, your followers would have gone astray".[11] It is difficult to translate the Arabic word fitrah into English; it denotes the natural and pure state in which one is born, an innate feeling that guides one to do

[11] Saheeh Bukhari

the “right” thing. Prophet Muhammad instinctively chose right over wrong, good over evil, and the Straight Path rather than the crooked path to Hell.

It was from the Holy city of Jerusalem, in the sacred precincts of Masjid Al-Aqsa[12] that Prophet Muhammad commenced the next stage of his miraculous Night Journey. Prophet Muhammad ascended to the lowest heaven from a rock. This rock can be found inside the Dome of the Rock, the most famous symbol of Jerusalem. It should not be confused with the actual Masjid building, which is on the other side of the Al-Aqsa compound. The entire precinct is the masjid, but many separate buildings exist there. It is important to remember that although the Dome of the Rock is inside the Masjid compound, it is not Masjid Al-Aqsa and it is not the place of prostration where Prophet Muhammad led the previous Prophets in prayer. From the rock, now covered by the familiar golden dome, Prophet Muhammad ascended to the lowest heaven in the company of Angel Gabriel.

The Ascension

[12] The compound is also known as “Temple Mount” in the West, after the temple that Solomon built there.

The Night Journey and the Ascension was a great blessing bestowed upon Muhammad, the Prophet of God. It was a journey beginning at the Holy Masjid in Mecca, then moving overland to Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and finally continuing up through the seven heavens into the presence of God, the Almighty. As we travel up through the seven heavens with Prophet Muhammad, it is important to remember that the places he visits are not part of Paradise.

In the English language, we generally use the word heaven to mean the spiritual plane of eternal happiness, the reward for a righteous life and the opposite of hell, the place of eternal punishment. However, this was not always the case; the word heaven comes from the Old English word heofon,[13] used to denote the sky, which is the area above the earth where the celestial bodies are. Eventually, heaven lost its original meaning and came to imply Paradise. In Arabic, however, there have always been two separate words used, sama and jennah. The word sama is used for the skies above us, and

[13] Webster's Online dictionary.

they are part of the temporary world which will be destroyed on the Day of Judgement. The word jennah, however, denotes Paradise, the land of eternal bliss, the permanent home of the righteous believers, and the opposite of Hell.

"Then He completed and finished from their creation as seven heavens in two Days and He made in each heaven its affair. And We adorned the nearest heaven with light sources to be an adornment, as well as to guard. Such is the Decree of Him the All-Mighty, the All-Knower." (Quran 41:12)

"Their Lord gives them glad tidings of a Mercy from Him, and that He is pleased, and of Gardens (jennah) for them wherein are everlasting delights. They will dwell therein forever. Verily, with God is a great reward." (Quran 9:21-22)

The Wonders of God

Prophet Muhammad ascended into the heavens from the rock now housed in the familiar golden dome that has become the symbol for Jerusalem. This is a journey that no other human had ever made or has made since. It demonstrates God's ability to bring the seemingly impossible into being. Here, the concepts of time and space as we know them do not apply, and it is beyond our human capabilities to understand the true

omnipotence of God. In his sayings and traditions, Prophet Muhammad described the size of the heavens; the first heaven, as compared to the second, is similar to a small ring in the desert, and he continued this narrative until he described the sixth heaven as being the size of a ring in the desert compared to the seventh heaven. The magnitude of this is unimaginable. Our earth, and what we call the universe, is contained within the first heaven. Even with the scientific knowledge of the 21st century, we have no idea how big this is, how far the universe extends, or what wonders it contains.

Prophet Muhammad travelled with the Angel Gabriel up into the heights of the heavens. Together they came to the gate of the first heaven, where Angel Gabriel sought permission to enter. The gatekeepers asked, “Who is it?” to which Gabriel replied, “It is I, Gabriel”. The gatekeepers then asked who was accompanying him; when they were told it was Muhammad, they asked if he had been given his mission to guide all of mankind to the worship of One God. Angel Gabriel answered in the affirmative, so the angels welcomed Prophet Muhammad, called his arrival a pleasure, and opened the gate.

Greeting the Prophets

Prophet Muhammad tells us that he saw his father Adam, the father of all of mankind. He greeted him with the greeting of all Muslims, - Assalamu alaikum (may peace be upon you). Adam returned the greeting and expressed his faith in Muhammad's prophethood. He called him his pure son, the pure prophet. Imagine the pleasure that this meeting must have given to both men. After thousands of years, Adam was able to see his son Muhammad, the greatest of his descendents. Muhammad was able to look into the eyes of the father of mankind. The wonders however were only just beginning. Angel Gabriel and Prophet Muhammad then ascended to the second heaven.

At the gate, Angel Gabriel again sought permission to enter. When the gatekeepers learned Prophet Muhammad had been given his mission and was trying to enter, they welcomed him and opened the gate. There Prophet Muhammad saw the two cousins, Prophet John (known in Christian traditions as the Baptist) and the Messenger of God, Prophet Jesus; Prophet Muhammad exchanged greetings with them.

Prophet Muhammad and Angel Gabriel ascended once more to the gates of the third heaven. At each gate, the same exchange took place. When the gatekeepers had established that it was Angel Gabriel in the company of

Prophet Muhammad, who had indeed been given his mission, they gave permission to enter. Here, in the third heaven, Prophet Muhammad met Joseph and described him as an embodiment of half of all beauty.

As Prophet Muhammad met the Prophets in each heaven, he exchanged greetings with them, and this was always Assalamu alaikum, the greeting of peace used by all those in submission to the One True God. In the fourth heaven, Prophet Muhammad met Prophet Idris, whom God described in Quran (19:57) as being elevated to a very high level. In the fifth heaven, he met Prophet Aaron, the brother of Moses. At each meeting, the Prophets expressed their faith in Muhammad's prophethood. In the sixth heaven, Prophet Muhammad met Moses.

Whenever Prophet Moses is mentioned in the Quran or in the narrations of Prophet Muhammad, we know that something important is about to be described. After the two Prophets had exchanged greetings and Prophet Moses had expressed his faith in Muhammad's prophethood, Moses started to weep. When he was asked why, he replied: "A young man has come after me, and more of his followers will enter paradise then my followers".

Until the advent of Islam, Prophet Moses had had the largest following of any Prophet.

Moses cried, and from this, we can understand that there was a type of rivalry between the Prophets; but it was not a competition filled with jealousy or envy. Rather, it was filled with compassion. As we move further into the journey, we will see the love and compassion Prophet Moses had for Muhammad and his followers. Prophet Muhammad and Angel Gabriel then ascended into the seventh heaven.

The Seventh Heaven

The Angel Gabriel and Prophet Muhammad continued their miraculous ascension through the heavens. This journey was far beyond the wildest imagining of any human being. It began in the deserts of Arabia and spanned the reaches of the known universe and beyond. At the gate of the seventh heaven, they exchanged the same questions and answers as in the previous heavens, and the angels declared their pleasure at meeting Prophet Muhammad. Permission to enter was given and the Prophet of God, accompanied by Gabriel, the angel trusted with the revelations of God, moved into the final heaven.

The seventh heaven is an expression used by Christians to denote extreme happiness or bliss, as in “I am in the seventh heaven”. In Islam, the seventh heaven is where Prophet

Mohammad met Prophet Abraham; and indeed, he (Muhammad) must have been extremely happy and in a state of bliss, having been honoured with this journey of wonders. Both Prophets exchanged greetings by saying Assalamu alaikum (may peace be upon you) and, as every other prophet had done, Prophet Abraham expressed his belief and faith in Prophet Muhammad's mission.

Through his son, Ishmael, Abraham is the father of the Arabs and the ancestor of Prophet Muhammad; he is an ancestor of the people who became the Children of Israel (followers of Prophet Moses) through his son Isaac. In Jewish traditions, Abraham is called the father of the Jews. However, Islam rejects this idea, for the Quran clearly states that he was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but a believer in pure monotheism (belief in One God).

"Why do you dispute about Abraham, while the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Have you then no sense? Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim Hanifa."[14] (Quran 3:65 & 67)

[14] The word Muslim denotes a man who submits to God alone, whilst Hanifa connotes purity, truth and sincerity. The Arabic dictionary assigns the word orthodox as one of the denotations of Hanifa, but it is more than orthodoxy. It is n untaught orthodoxy; a sense of the true nature of things that is instinctual and natural.

Muslims are required to believe in all of the Prophets of God; Abraham, however, holds a special place as one of the important messengers of God and has the unique honour of being called, in both Islamic and Christian[15] traditions, the beloved servant of God. Together, Abraham and his son Ishmael built the Kaaba (the black cubical building in the middle of the Holy Masjid in Mecca).

"And remember when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House, saying, Our Lord! Accept this from us. Verily! You are the All-Hearer, the All-Knower." (Quran 2:127)

Muslims turn their faces towards the Kaba many times every day whilst performing their prayers, and in every prayer, they ask God to bless Abraham and his family.

The World of Angels

While in the seventh heaven, Prophet Muhammad was shown the building known as the much-frequented house, or al Bayt al-Mamoor in Arabic. It is fitting that Prophet Abraham was here with this house, as it is the heavenly equivalent of the Kaaba in Mecca. Each year at the time of pilgrimage (Hajj), more than 2 million Muslims from all over the world flock to Mecca to follow in the footsteps of Prophet Abraham and perform certain rites

[15] Isaiah 41:8 & 2.

including circling the Kaaba. Every day 70,000 angels visit this much-frequented house in the seventh heaven to worship God. Prophet Muhammad informed us that, once the angels have visited Bayt al-Mamoor, they never return. God swears by this house in the Quran.

"And by the Bayt al-Mamoor." (Quran 52:4)

Seventy thousand angels every day! What are the implications of this? Think about it and wonder for how many thousands or even millions of years has this been happening? How many of these beings, created by God from light, are there? This was another wonder that Prophet Muhammad was privileged to see and made able to describe to us. In his traditions, he also informs us that the heavens above us are moaning, every space as big as the width of four fingers is occupied by an angel worshipping God.

The Uppermost Boundary

Prophet Muhammad then moved through the seventh heaven to the uppermost boundary, to Sidrat al-Muntaha, a lote tree.

"Near Sidrat al-Muntaha (lote-tree of the utmost boundary. Near it is the Paradise of Abode." (Quran 53:14-15)

He described its fruits like jugs and its leaves as big as elephant ears. Four rivers originated from the lote tree's roots. When he asked

about them, Prophet Muhammad was told that two of the rivers originated in Paradise. Nothing has reached us about the names or significance of these two rivers from the narrative of the ascension. However, he was told that the other two rivers were replicas of the Nile and the Euphrates, two rivers that are especially blessed in this world of mankind.

Sidrat al-Muntaha is called the uttermost boundary because everything that comes up from the earth or the heavens stops there, and everything that comes down stops there,[16] and because the knowledge of the angels stops at that point. No one has gone beyond it except Prophet Muhammad.[17] Beyond this point, we leave the heavens and move into the realm of the hereafter, the realm that contains Paradise and the Throne of God. As Prophet Muhammad continues his miraculous journey, he moves into this realm and stands in the presence of God Almighty.

In the Presence of God

Beyond the lote tree, the upmost boundary is a place

[16] Saheeh Muslim

[17] Imam Al-Nawawi

where, apart from one exception, no human has ever been. The night journey and ascension through the heavens culminated in Prophet Muhammad moving past the upmost boundary and standing in the presence of Almighty God. Beyond the lote tree is the realm of the hereafter, Paradise, and the throne of God and God himself.

The word miraculous does not go far enough in describing what a wonder this must have been for Prophet Muhammad. It is beyond description and beyond imagining. However, the Prophet Muhammad did not see God with his eyes, as God tells us in the Quran

"No vision can grasp Him." (Quran 6:103)

One of the companions asked Prophet Muhammad directly if he saw God, to which he answered,

"He is veiled by light, how could I see him." (Saheeh Muslim)

The fact remains however, that Muhammad Prophet of God, stood in the presence of God.

The Importance of Prayer

God spoke to Prophet Muhammad and we have no details of the exchange except that God enjoined the daily prayers upon Prophet Muhammad and his followers. From this, we immediately understand the importance of prayer. It is the only command which God

ordained in the heavens; all other decrees originated on earth. Prayer is a gift from God to those who truly believe in His Oneness. God bestowed this gift upon Prophet Muhammad who in turn gave it to the followers of Islam. It is a gift full of great blessings and bounties. It establishes and maintains our connection to God. God has no need of our prayers but we, as helpless human beings, are in great need of feeling connected to Him. In fact, the Arabic word for the five daily prayers is salah, which come from the root word meaning "connection".

"Guard strictly five obligatory prayers especially the middle prayer . And stand before God with obedience." (Quran 2:238)

God enjoined 50 prayers on Prophet Muhammad and his followers. As Prophet Muhammad was descending he passed by Prophet Moses who requested to know what had been enjoined. When Prophet Muhammad explained that he had been ordered to prayer 50 times per day, Moses felt astonished and immediately said, "Go back to your Lord and ask for a reduction". When God prescribed 50 prayers, Prophet Muhammad accepted it, Moses, having had been a great prophet himself, knew what from his followers what people could and could not handle in regards to religious obligations. He was sure that the followers of Muhammad would not be able to

perform that many prayers. Prophet Muhammad had knowledge. but Prophet Moses at this time had more experience.

Prophet Muhammad accepted the advice of his older brother/prophet, went back into the presence of God, and asked for a reduction. God reduced them by ten to forty prayers. Prophet Muhammad descended again; Prophet Moses asked him what happened. When he heard that the reduction was only ten, Prophet Moses sent him back to ask again for a further reduction.

This exchange continued until the number of obligatory prayers became five. Prophet Moses suggested a further reduction saying, **"O Muhammad, I know people, your nation will not be able to handle it, go back and ask for the burden on your people to be relieved."** Prophet Muhammad answered "No." He felt ashamed to ask for another reduction and said he was satisfied with five daily prayers. A voice rang out, saying, "The prayers have been reduced to five but they will be rewarded as though they were fifty." God makes it clear to us that even praying these five prayers can be difficult for some people, but that those who establish the connection and trust that they will one day meet their Lord will find it easy.

"And seek help in patience and the prayer: and truly it is extremely heavy and

hard except for the true believers in God. Those who obey God with full submission, fear much from His Punishment, and believe in His Promise (Paradise, etc.) and in His Warnings (Hell, etc.). (They are those) who are certain that they are going to meet their Lord, and that unto Him they are going to return." (Quran 2:45–46)

Mercy, Love and Compassion

This miraculous night concluded with this sign of the mercy of God. Imagine how hard it would be to pray 50 times a day. Although we learned during this journey that Moses cried when he realised Prophet Muhammad would have more followers then he on the Day of Judgement, we also learn how eager Prophet Moses was to give advice to Prophet Muhammad, and how keen he was to make the practice of Islam easy upon the believers. The competition between the Prophets was one of love and compassion, and from this we should learn how to treat each other. Although God tells us to compete with one another in doing deeds of righteousness, we should encourage and enable one another to do this easily.

"...so strive as in a race in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to God; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ." (Quran 5:48)

Prophet Muhammad then descended back to the Holy Mosque in Mecca. The companions of the Prophet were now about to face the biggest test to their faith so far. Muhammad, the Prophet of God, was about to reveal that he had returned from an overnight journey to the farthest Masjid in Jerusalem, a journey that normally took more than one month. He was also about to say he had travelled where no man had gone before, through the heavens and into the presence of God. This was a miraculous journey by night, but would his companions believe him and how would his enemies react?

The Return

Prophet Muhammad travelled on the back of Al-Buraq all the way to the farthest Mosque in Jerusalem. He ascended through the seven heavens and marvelled at wonders unimaginable. He looked into the faces and exchanged greetings with many of his fellow Prophets, and the final slave and Messenger of God, Muhammad, stood in the presence of God Himself. On the same night, only several hours after he had commenced his journey, Prophet Muhammad returned to Mecca.

This miraculous journey was about to become a weapon against Prophet Muhammad

and his followers by his enemies, and equally it would be an extreme test of faith for the believers. Upon his homecoming, Prophet Muhammad made his way to Umm Ayman and told her of his miraculous journey. She responded, “O Messenger of God, do not tell anyone about this.” Umm Ayman had perfect faith in Prophet Muhammad and believed his account of the journey, but she was afraid of how others would respond.

Prophet Muhammad described Umm Ayman as “my mother after my own mother”. She was the faithful servant of his mother Aminah and remained with Prophet Muhammad through the deaths of his mother and grandfather. Prophet Muhammad and Umm Ayman had always been very close, and at the completion of this wondrous journey, he went to Umm Ayman’s home, perhaps for comfort and ease while he contemplated this miracle, and decided his next move.

Prophet Muhammad responded by saying that he would tell the people about the wondrous night. He considered it his responsibility before God to convey the message, no matter the response or consequences; God was responsible for the outcome. He left the house quietly with sombre contemplation, and made his way to the Holy Mosque. He met people along the way, and

slowly the news of the night journey spread amongst the people.

The Response

While Prophet Mohammad was sitting silently in the Mosque, Abu Jahl approached him and asked casually, “O Muhammad is there anything new?” Known as one of the greatest enemies of Islam Abu Jahl was responsible for the torture, punishment, murder and harassment of the new Muslims throughout the early days of Islam. Even though he was aware of the animosity and hatred Abu Jahl felt towards him, Prophet Muhammad answered truthfully and said, “This past night I have travelled to Jerusalem and back.”

Abu Jahl, being unable to contain his amusement, responded by requesting Muhammad to repeat these words in front of the people of Mecca. Prophet Muhammad responded in the affirmative, and Abu Jahl left the Mosque running, calling out to the people as he ran through the streets. When sufficient people had gathered in the Mosque, at Abu Jahl’s request Prophet Muhammad said, for all to hear, “I have been to Jerusalem and back.”

The crowd of people started to laugh, whistle, and clap. They treated it as a big joke and fell against one another laughing. This was the response expected by Abu Jahl and he was thrilled. The disbelievers in the crowd saw a

chance to put an end to Islam. They ridiculed and belittled Prophet Muhammad's claim. Among the crowd were people who had travelled to Jerusalem and they asked Prophet Muhammad to describe what he had seen.

The Prophet of God began to describe his journey but he became irritated. He spent only a brief amount of time in Jerusalem, and the miraculous nature of this travels had meant that he did not remember small details and descriptions. However, Prophet Muhammad tells us that God showed him the details "right in front of his eyes" and he described what he had seen "stone by stone, brick by brick". The travellers confirmed his descriptions. (Saheeh Bukhari)

There is another narration[18] that says that whilst travelling back to Mecca, Prophet Muhammad passed over a caravan. He was able to describe clearly. The caravan had lost a camel, and Prophet Muhammad called from the sky telling them the whereabouts of the camel. He also drank from their water supply.

The people of Mecca immediately dispatched some one to meet the caravan before it entered the city to ask questions about the previous night. They confirmed that a strange voice called out the location of the lost camel and that part of their water supply had

[18] The Biography of Prophet Muhammad by ibn Hisham.

disappeared. Still these confirmations were not enough. The people jeered and laughed and disbelieved the words of the Prophet of God. This miraculous event was such a test of faith that even some of the new Muslims disbelieved and turned away from the faith of Islam.

The Sweetness of Faith

To those whose faith was strong and true, the Power of God was obvious. Some of those who found the whole story difficult to believe went to see Abu Bakr, the best friend and loyal supporter of Prophet Mohammad. They asked him if he believed Prophet Muhammad travelled overnight to Jerusalem, and back to Mecca. Without hesitation Abu Bakr replied, “If the messenger of God said so, then it is true”. It was because of this occasion that Abu Bakr earned the title As-Siddeeq (the foremost believer). This was a turning point for many Muslims; after already facing the physical torture and abuse of the disbelievers, they now had to grapple with a concept beyond their wildest imaginings. Some failed, but many soared to new heights and were able to taste the sweetness of true submission to the One God.

The journey by night, from the Holy Mosque in Mecca to the farthest Mosque in Jerusalem, and the ascension through the heavens and into the presence of Almighty God was a miracle

granted by God to His final slave and Prophet, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and one of the greatest of honours bestowed upon any human.